**Mark blog-week one**

Mark 1 v 1-4: Welcome back to these daily blogs!

Why have I chosen the Gospel of Mark? Well, because it is a hugely important Gospel, the first of what are termed the Synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke. These are so-called because they are so closely linked. Of Mark's 661 verses Matthew reproduces 606 and Luke 320! There are only twenty four verses in Mark which are not reproduced in one or the other of those two Gospels! Mark was the first to be written and it is clear that Mark-who was a very young man during the ministry of Jesus and is first referred to as being invited on the first missionary journey of Paul-took his information from the apostle Peter. You will find Mark an exciting read, full of short, punchy sentences and movement. Mark doesn't look at all at Christ's birth, but plunges in right at the start of Jesus' ministry.

Let's look at these opening four verses: although I've said already that Mark begins his Gospel at the start of Christ's ministry, he does refer to the prophets of long ago and, by implication, it was in the mind of God long, long ago before that!

Mark quotes from the prophecies of Isaiah and of Malachi, although in those writings it is a threat, whereas Mark presents it as a kind of blessings with strings attached! When Christ is allowed to come into the hearts of men and women, the antiseptic of the Christian faith cleanses the moral poison of society and leaves it pure and clean.

Mark introduces John the Baptist who came to prepare the way for Christ's coming by announcing a baptism of repentance-already the cleansing, purifying work of God had begun. Now Jews knew about ceremonial washings and the baptism of Gentile proselytes-non-Jews who wanted to join the Jewish faith. However, John, a Jew, was asking other Jews to submit to that which only Gentiles were supposed to need. John had made the discovery that to be a Jew due to birth was not to automatically become a member of God's chosen people-which was the assumption-only those cleansed of their sins were permitted to be children of God.

The baptism was accompanied by confession: to themselves, to those whom that person had wronged, and to God. It is when we admit: ''I have sinned'', that God can say: ''I forgive''. And this is a guaranteed response from a loving, giving God!

Thus the Gospel of Mark begins with what makes it Good News: that the way to God is open to all!

MARK 1 v 5-8: In the light of Jesus Christ's appearance, John the Baptist is rather dwarfed by the Light of the World, but his ministry was mightily effective and we can observe the longevity of his witness when we read in the book of Acts- chapter 19 v 1-7- that there were people who called themselves 'Disciples of John the Baptist'. Why was it that John made such an impact?

1. He was a man who lived his message. He stayed in the wilderness-travelling through it in the twenty first century brings home the severity of living there; he wore a camel's hair garment, just like Elijah; he ate locusts and honey- a simple diet.

2. He told people what in their heart of hearts they already knew: when John commanded his listeners to repent, it was something that they had always been aware of- that they had not kept God's Law.

3. John was completely humble. It was clear to his listeners that here was a man with no ego and someone completely self-effacing.

4. His message was effective, because he pointed to something and someone beyond himself. He spoke of a man who would transform a person's inner life. John's baptism demonstrated the desire of those being baptized to repent before God; the coming of Jesus provided the way to an inner cleansing and complete transformation.

For those of us of a certain age, John the Baptist's role was similar to that of the telephone operator. When trying to contact someone, the operator would take your call and then contact the person you required: John the Baptist led people to Christ in repentance and acceptance.

MARK 1 v 9-11: Mark doesn't address the issues surrounding the baptism of Jesus, but it might be good for us to ask one question. We have read already that John's baptism was one of repentance, so what had such baptism to do with the perfect human, Jesus? Well, as in everything Jesus did, there was a transforming quality to His commitment. For Jesus, His baptism was for four things:

1. It was the moment of decision. For Jesus, the emergence of his cousin John from the wilderness was the signal for Him to begin His ministry.

2. It was the moment of identification. As far as we know, Jesus had led an anonymous life up to this point. Jesus was determined to identify Himself firstly with this Godward movement which John had begun and secondly to identify Himself as the One who had been promised. The signs of His Messiahship would have only been noticed by one or two and even John the Baptist had to double-check later that Jesus was the One.

3. It was the moment of approval. Jesus had decided on this course of action and now He received, at the point of baptism, the seal of approval from the Father and the Holy Spirit. The words of the Father were intended for the ears of Jesus, not for all those in the crowd.

4. It was the moment of equipment. The Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus, coming down as a dove might do. Now, think of John's character and his words and contrast them with the image of the dove. John came to hack away with an axe the legalism and hypocrisy that had become synonymous with the Jewish religion; Jesus came to conquer men and women's hearts, but the conquest will be the conquest of love.

**If you have not yet been baptised by full immersion, please think about it, one of only two sacraments required by Jesus. If Jesus was willing to be baptised, why not you?**

So, just a few verses into Mark's Gospel and we are right in the heart of the action! What excitement and so much to look forward to as we continue our studies!

MARK 1 v 12, 13: It is a sharp reminder to us that when we are most blessed by God we should be aware that the greatest temptations are likely to be there too! From the sense of being called and equipped and authorised for His ministry, Jesus is thrust out by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness for FORTY days. The same Spirit who anointed Jesus at His baptism now drives Him out to test Him! One thing we learn from this immediately then is that temptations are not there to bring us down, but to strengthen us! They are not meant for our ruin, but for our good.

Just as Moses was with God on Mount Sinai for 40 days when he received the Ten Commandments; just as Elijah walked for 40 days in the strength of the meal the angel prepared for him, so Jesus was supported by angels in His wilderness travails.

Before He began His ministry and was swept along by the tide which His miracle-working caused, Jesus had to decide how to do His work. We can read in the other Gospels that Satan was encouraging Jesus to take shortcuts to glory, but His Father had told Him that He must go the way of servanthood and suffering.

So, some lessons for us:

1. Remember that God is in everything which happens to us-the good and the bad. Satan can only do what God allows him to do- Job 1 v 12.

2. The angels are with us to protect and support us-Psalm 91 v 11, 12:*“For He will command His angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.”*

3. The Holy Spirit is within us, not only to protect us, but to challenge, to purify and work in us.

4. Take time to pray, particularly before any big decision. Jesus repeatedly went up to the hills to pray before major decisions, e.g. Luke 6 v 12-16

MARK 1 v 14, 15: We can read more of John the Baptist's story and his premature death in Matthew 14 v 1-12. As John predicted, he would get less as Jesus grew greater.

In the message of Jesus there are three great words of the Christian faith:

1. There is the GOOD NEWS! This was exciting transformational news Jesus was bringing! It wasn't some kind of 'positive message' about only thinking good thoughts or whatever: no, this was TRUTH, with the coming of Jesus Christ human beings could clearly see what God is like. It is also a message of HOPE. Jesus came into a pessimistic world, because humanity could not become good in its own strength, but He would provide everything with which to live holy lives- the rescuer had come to rescue. And it was a message of PEACE, because Jesus unified the warring factions within humans, providing victory over sin and death and bringing unity between people and God. It was also good news of God's promise; Christianity tells us of the God who is ready to give far more than what we ask and a Gospel of immortality and salvation: Jesus gives us the wherewithal to live triumphant, victorious lives both today and forever!

2. There is the word REPENT. The Greek here is 'metanoia' and literally means 'a change of mind'. Repentance then means much more than feeling sorry about our sins, it means to hate sin itself. Does the thought of sin and sinning fill you with disgust, or do you continue to play around its edges?

3. ''Believe'', Jesus proclaims. Take Jesus at His Word, believe that God is the kind of God Jesus has told us about, that He would be prepared to make any sacrifice to bring us back to Himself. God reaches for us: for you and for me.